

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, February 5, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Jews, Christians, and Muslims”
Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 5:13-20

we hear in our Isaiah reading today explicit commandments: “loose the bonds of injustice...let the oppressed go free...and do not hide yourself from your own kin”--meaning do not neglect to look after them; if we are to treat such a passage as relevant to our own lives, as we must continually seek to do with the Bible, then we have to ask ourselves: where today do we see injustice?; who today do we see being oppressed?; and who today might we be failing to recognize as our own kin?

while there are multiple answers to those questions, one particular issue comes to my mind from the amount of discussion there has been in the media for the last several weeks about refugees and about barring people from several Muslim nations, or even Muslims in general, from our country; and it is not just that people are discussing this; two mosques in Texas were burned to the ground in January by people who felt they should act to scare Muslims away; now I’m not qualified to speak about international policies, nor about particular political decisions, but I do believe that as Christians we have to be aware of the religious and scriptural background that we must bring to any such discussion about how our faith should interact with other faiths

when this Isaiah passage was written, the original interpretation of the word “kin” would have referred only to Jews; yet later we Christians, by adopting the Hebrew scriptures as ours too, added ourselves to that same religious family; but what about Muslims?; can we extend our definition of religious “kin” to include Muslims, especially at a time when some people are saying Christians and Muslims cannot, or should not, coexist?

there is another passage from the Hebrew scriptures that also speaks to this; Genesis chapters 16 to 21 tell the story of Abraham’s two families: one with his Egyptian slave-wife Hagar and their son Ishmael, and the other with his wife Sarah and their son Isaac; Jews trace their religious inheritance to Abraham through Isaac; Muslims trace their religious inheritance to Abraham through Ishmael; we Christians too have bought into that religious heritage for ourselves

so all three of our faiths share this same religious inheritance from Abraham; that's why the term 'Abrahamic faiths' is used to describe the family nature of our three religions; and this is despite the fact that history, both ancient and modern, shows our three faiths doing a very poor job of getting along with each other; we have not made much of that shared religious heritage; but if we talk in terms of numbers, over half of the world's current population is comprised of people following one of the three Abrahamic faiths; if we were to work together, that could make a big difference

look what we do have in common: all of our three faiths call us to worship the God of Abraham in congregations weekly and to pray to God as individuals daily; all of our three faiths call us to finance and perform charitable works; all of our three faiths call us to recognize particular seasons and days of each year with special piety; and all of our three faiths call us to look forward to a judgment day with eternal rewards hanging in the balance; those are not insignificant similarities; now I'm certainly not suggesting that there are not differences between us, nor that difficult issues are not at stake; but with what we do have in common, and by focusing on what we do share, I believe there is a tremendous basis for our three faiths to work together for a better world, and a tremendous need to do so

I'm not expecting that some large movement will influence our faiths; I'm thinking on a more personal level about how we treat the Muslims who live right here among us; when I went to visit a parishioner at MCV last week it was apparent, from seeing their head scarves, that many women nurses and doctors working there are Muslim; I've been having my hair cut by an Iranian barber for twenty years, and we do have some interesting discussions about how our countries are, or are not, getting along at any particular time; I expect she is hoping to return to Teheran this summer to visit her family, as she has every year--but she may not be able to travel there anymore; and where I used to live in Bon Air was just around the corner from the Virginia Islamic Center; Lynn Ellen and I have visited there several times, when they held neighborhood open houses to welcome people into their mosque; I got to know Imam Amonette from there when he and I were invited, along with Rabbi Romer from Synagogue Or Ami, to hold a panel discussion at Trinity Episcopal School; Trinity felt it was important for their students to meet and hear from congregational leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths serving in their neighborhood

notice that this same theme is also addressed by what Jesus says in our gospel reading today: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid...

let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven;” that “city on a hill” phrase is one that was used by Puritans at the founding of our nation, and it was later referenced as an important way of looking at America by Presidents as different as Kennedy and Reagan; but how can we claim to be a light to the world if we are willing to discriminate against Muslims, or against any other group, because of their faith?

as I thought and prayed about this last week it occurred to me that I needed to take a field trip to a nearby place that was devoted to this same question; the Valentine Museum’s First Freedom Center is near my house and I had not been there; it is at the corner of 14th and Cary, where Virginia’s Statute for Religious Freedom was passed by the General Assembly in 1786; and the significance was not lost on me that my walk to the First Freedom Center took me by the Virginia Holocaust Museum; I was reminded just how horrible religious intolerance can become

at the First Freedom Center I read this from the text of the Statute for Religious Freedom: “that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions...that no man shall...suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief;” this Statute was the basis for our Constitution’s First Amendment protections of religious freedom; (now it may seem a bit ironic that one of the effects of this Statute was to dis-establish the Episcopal Church in the favor of dissenting Protestants, such as Baptists, but that was the right thing to do); and its principles are no less important today in protecting Muslims, or any other religious group, against a majority who would seek to oppress them

another quote displayed at the Center also caught my notice; it was from a speech candidate John Kennedy made in 1960 to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, a Protestant group which was wary of his Catholicism; in that speech Kennedy said this: “I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish...where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace...and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is an act against all;” I believe it is fair to say that if this speech were given today it would name not only Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, but would also name Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others; and I would venture to paraphrase the quote to add that an act against one religion is an act against all religions

returning to our Isaiah passage, notice that its charges also have promises associated with them: “If you remove the yoke from among you...the speaking of

evil...and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness...The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs;” Isaiah reminds us that our work against injustice and religious oppression will bring us blessings, as well as to those we seek to protect; I believe that Isaiah is also reminding us that, in God’s eyes, we are all “kin” in this world together